



Free Methodist Historical Society

# Newsletter

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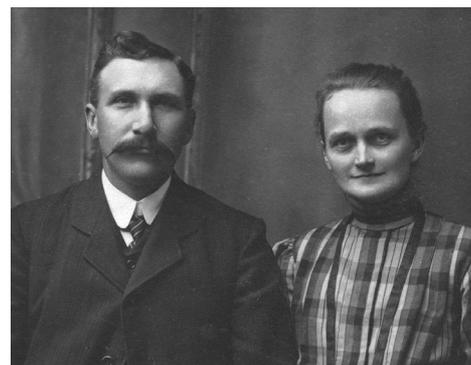
## Norwegian Free Methodist Connections Uncovered in New Book

BY DAVID BUNDY

Free Methodists in Norway during the late nineteenth century! Not many would have thought of the possibility. Immigrant Silvert V. Ulness (1865-1937) was converted to Free Methodism through contact with the Pentecost Bands. Lillian May Burt (1869-1955) was a Pentecost Band evangelist from Michigan. They were married in 1890 and sought appointment as a Pentecost Band for Norway. They were sent there by Vivian Dake as Pentecost Band #12. When the Bands were forced from the Free Methodist Church, the Ulness family decided to remain in the church as appointed missionaries. They were a crucial conduit of Free Methodist radical holiness ideals into Northern Europe during the last decades of the 1800s.

Author Inge Bjørnevoll served more than 40 years as a missionary with the Norwegian Pentecostal Mission. His research has resulted in a bold new interpretation of the Free Methodist mission in Norway and of Ulness. It is based on contextual, private and public documentation, as well as on a close reading of the two periodicals edited by Ulness: *Ild-Tungen* (Tongue of Fire) and its successor, *Sandhed og Frihed* (Truth and Freedom). At their height, these had a circulation of about 6,000 in Scandinavia, a network and impact far greater than the two congregations.

Bjørnevoll interprets the work of Ulness as the first Pentecostal mission in Norway and demonstrates the continuities of ideas, personnel and networks with the post-1906 Pentecostal movement in Norway, and



from there throughout the Nordic countries and Europe. He clearly demonstrates connections between Ulness and future Norwegian Pentecostal leaders T. B. Barratt and Erik Andersen Nordquelle as well as Barratt's friend in Denmark, Phillip Wittrich, among others.

Among the many contributions of Bjørnevoll's volume is the detailed tracing of the personal heritage of Ulness. The "finds" include ship records for the emigration from Norway, detailed information about his family heritage (complicated by the changes of names), documentation from local archives, information about the precise sites of congregations, data about the congregations and the buildings that housed them. Careful attention was given to the social contexts of the ministry sites. Bjørnevoll also calls attention to the visit of Vivian Dake to Sogndal, Norway (1891), perhaps the only visit to Norway of a non-Lutheran, non-Methodist Episcopal international leader of a religious movement during this period. Dake's evangelistic work along the coast of Norway was significant. Importantly, Bjørnevoll traces the legal difficulties faced by the Free Methodist Church during its first two decades in Norway, as a new "dissenting" movement from the state Lutheran church. The volume provides well-selected excerpts from Ulness's writings.

Bjørnevoll's "Ild-Tungen" is an important contribution to FM history, European Radical Holiness history, and to the study of trans-Atlantic networks of the Holiness and Pentecostal Movements. It is also a moving tribute to an intrepid couple who struggled to communicate the FM version of Christian faith in the context of Norway.

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The Mission of the Free Methodist Historical Society is to preserve Free Methodist heritage and transmit it faithfully to each generation in order to assist the Free Methodist Church in fulfilling its mission.

# The Mysterious Case of the Disneyland Invitation

BY JOSH AVERY

I've always been a huge Disney fan — from visiting the theme parks and taking a peek behind the magic to learning more about the man himself, Walt Disney. During one of my most recent studies into Disney history, I stumbled across an interesting fact that I couldn't overlook: When Disneyland opened in Anaheim for the first time on July 17, 1955, Walt himself invited a group of Free Methodists.

Unfortunately, that's as much information as the book revealed. Nowhere was the name of the specific church that received the invite, the names of those involved, or even the reason Walt chose to invite them. Among a list of other denominations on the page, the only clue was that Walt Disney felt it was important to invite a group of Free Methodists to the opening day of his dream becoming a reality.

I immediately wanted to know more, but contacting the author of the book, the official Walt Disney Company Archives, and even the local Anaheim Free Methodist Church both proved dead ends. Meanwhile, I stumbled across a group on Facebook called "Growing Up Free Methodist," a page for adults interested in documenting the history and sharing their memories of the FMC. While the folks at Growing Up Free Methodist didn't have any leads about the opening day of Disneyland, they did tell another fascinating story involving a famous mouse.

It was December 10, 1936 — only eight years after Walt had created Mickey Mouse. Preparations had begun for the Christmas celebration at the Free Methodist orphanage in Woodstock, Illinois, a refuge called the Industrial Home for Children. While the children may have been dreaming of sugarplums and holiday delights, a stressed Superintendent Herbert Gensch was running around the kitchen chasing a runaway mouse spotted the day before.

Gensch caught the small animal, but not in the way he had hoped. The rodent decided to run up his pant leg and was doing laps around

his waistline while an alarmed colleague, Oscar Allred, ran to grab a fruit jar. The duo was able to transition the mouse from the shirt to the jar and into a waiting cage somewhere far from the kitchen.

For many organizations, this would be the end of a mouse-loose-in-the-orphanage story that you might repeat each year, laughing as you remembered the look on the superintendent's face as the mouse terrorized him. For Allred, though, this was no ordinary mouse. In fact, he claimed this mouse could sing.

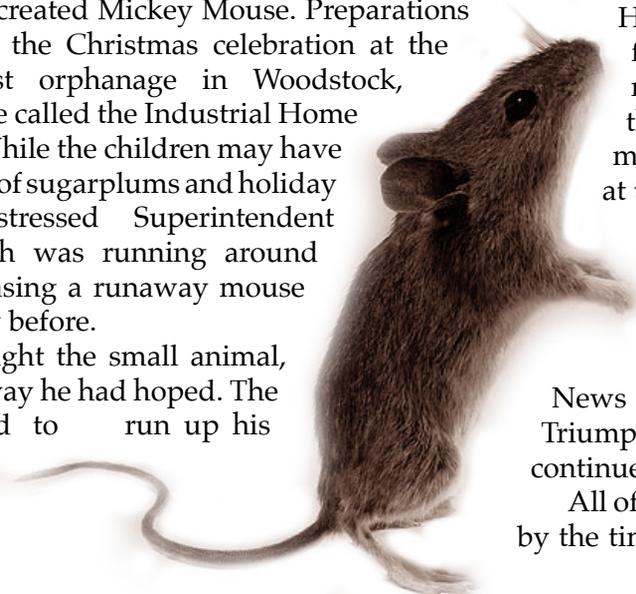
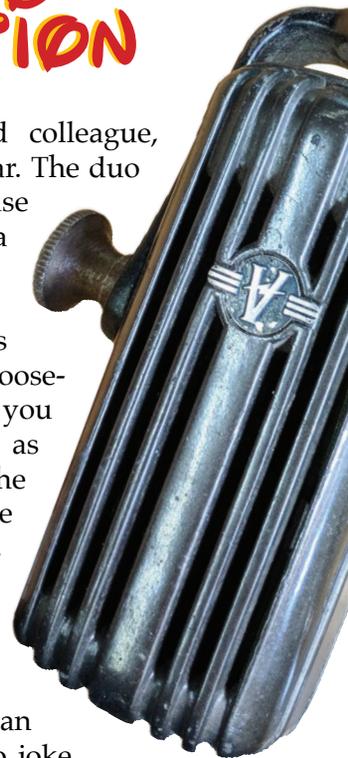
While some may have laughed Allred's belief off as the product of an overactive imagination, it was no joke. As first the orphans and then crowds came to hear this singing mouse, one onlooker described it like this: "It starts with a soft whirling trill, the chirps coming so close together that they provide a continuous tone. This grows louder to an intensive crescendo and then jumps two notes higher for another crescendo."

The mouse became so well-known that he needed a name, and it didn't take long for those involved to pick one. This would be Mickey, the Free Methodist singing mouse. As news spread about what Mickey could do, the calls to the Industrial Home for Children kept coming — first from local zoos and then one from the nearby radio station. As superintendent of the home, Gensch did his best to field all the media and individuals hoping to get a look at the mouse.

In the midst of the flurry, a veterinarian who came to see Mickey revealed a surprise: This was no Mickey at all, but apparently Minnie — a female mouse! Newspapers such as The Chicago Daily

News ran headlines like "Singing Mouse Scores Triumph in Radio Debut," and Minnie's popularity continued to grow as the days passed.

All of this happened within only a few days, and by the time Christmas of 1936 arrived, the orphans





were prepared to reveal the gift of a new glass cage to Minnie.

The mid-1930s was a very different time, not only in everyday living but also in how the Free Methodist Church operated. While today the denomination might find ways to engage the world in some form of evangelism through the draw of such an oddity, the leaders of yesteryear worried that Minnie may accomplish the opposite — moving the focus from Christ to a theatrical endeavor.

As January approached, it was decided that Minnie would need to be given to another organization to continue her rise to stardom. As Gensch put it to the media when asked why the denomination was asking them to turn over the care of

Minnie: “Our folks object to Minnie. In fact, all the children and the supervisors at the home have gotten awfully fond of her and hate to give her up. But our church is opposed to theaters.”

As Minnie continued singing under her new owners, the Woodstock Civic Club, she managed to land her biggest competition yet. It turned out that others across America and the world had discovered similar “singing mice,” and due to the interest in the phenomena, NBC decided to host a radio competition which would determine once and for all who would hold the title of the “best singing mouse in the world.”

While the winner of that world championship has been lost to history, what press documents do tell us is equally interesting. One of the judges tasked with choosing a victor on April 11, 1937 (and thereby crossing paths with Minnie the Free Methodist Mouse) was none other than Walt Disney himself.

Is it possible that Walt heard about Minnie’s past with the Free Methodist Church? Did it have any impact on his idea to invite a group of Free Methodists to the very first day at Disneyland 18 years later? These questions are, at best, theories that may never be proven or solidified.

What we do know is that an unknown number of Free Methodists in the Anaheim area were offered the opportunity of a lifetime more than 60 years ago.

What did they do with the chance to experience Walt’s crowning achievement firsthand? Did they decline the offer, knowing that July 17, 1955, was a Sunday, and that they’d all be busy with services at the local congregation? Did families take advantage of the invitation, and were there Free Methodist children who walked down Main Street, eyes widening at literally being the first to see Sleeping Beauty’s castle?

Are those very same children still alive, with memories of that magical (yet, as history tells us, crowded and not without its flaws) experience still intact? I hope so, and I still hold out hope that I will speak to one of those individuals. At some point in the future, any hope of finding a living connection to Walt’s mysterious invitation will be gone.

The thought may seem morose, but it’s the circle of life, isn’t it? We live, we die, and then — at least for those of us in Christ — we live again. Maybe the reason

we spend time reading these newsletters and studying B. T. Roberts and poring over old documents from men like John Wesley is because we understand that it’s not really about learning facts or becoming a history buff. Maybe we understand the deeper reality that we learn so much about ourselves and our lives when we look at our past.

All we can do with the past is tell ourselves stories about what once was — we can’t alter or change it — yet those stories can impact who we are today.

None of us want to spend our lives sitting on the sidelines, full of regrets when we come to the end of it all. We want history to reflect that we were merciful, compassionate, and that we loved God and loved people — that we’ve lived our story well.

For Walt, it always seemed to come back to a dream. A storyteller at heart, he knew the power of stories and the reality that we are the characters in the story told through our own lives. We have the chance to tell powerful stories with our actions to the world around us, and it begins with the willingness to dream.

To dream about a Church that learns from its history instead of repeating its mistakes.

To dream about the power of this moment — right now — and what you can do with it.

To dream a better tomorrow, accomplished through Christ. And as Walt once said, “If you can dream it, you can do it.”

Were there  
Free Methodist  
children who  
walked down  
Main Street  
with widening  
eyes?

# Celebrating 50 Years 1969-2019

2019 is a year of much excitement here! We are celebrating our 50th birthday, wrapping up library shelf fundraising, preparing for General Conference, and introducing a new membership program structure.

One of the ways we are honoring our 50th is by completing a multi-year redesign with new shelves in the library! We are half way to our \$30,000 goal. At the Marston Center, we value and cherish the example of those who have gone before us. For a gift of \$500 we will name a shelf in honor or memory of a loved one you designate. For a gift of \$1,700 we will name an entire shelving unit in honor or memory of your loved one. Please see details below for how to make a contribution.

Many preparations are ongoing for General Conference and we hope to see YOU there! We will have a booth that features life-size Flat B. T. and Ellen, instructions for recording oral histories, demonstrations of glass lantern slides, a sample of the new Free Methodist History Timeline game, and free books! We will also be hosting a special viewing of the Jake DeShazer movie on Thursday at 5:00 p.m. However, tickets do need to be purchased ahead of time. If you haven't signed up, come see us in the exhibit hall to secure movie tickets!

Lastly, many of you may have already heard that we are rolling out a new membership program structure. As a devoted reader of the Marston newsletter, you know that the amount of funding we generously receive through the Free Methodist Church does not cover our

operating budget. We'd like to introduce you to our new membership program structure that is designed to help us cover that gap:

- \$250 ..... Roberts Founders
- \$100 ..... Heritage Partners
- \$50 ..... Legacy Associates
- \$25 ..... Senior/Student Affiliates

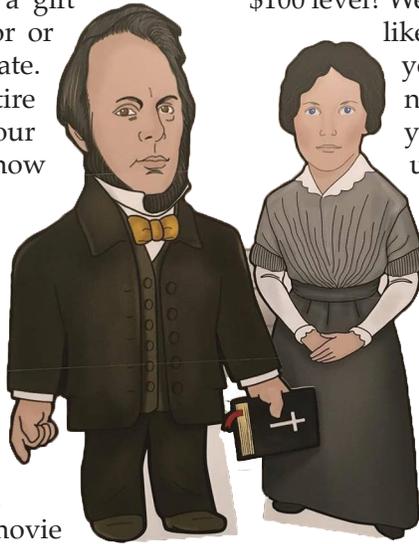
Will you partner with us as a yearly giver at the \$250 or \$100 level? We look forward to whatever level you would like to renew or restart your membership! If you have already renewed for 2019, then the new levels won't start until 2020. If this is you, thank you for already partnering with us!

Beginning this year, for those who have reached a \$1,000 lifetime giving level beginning with 2019 giving, we will honor by naming you a Marston Fellow and included in this list in a display at the Marston Historical Center.

Please make a check payable to FMC – USA and indicate MMHC and membership level in the memo and mail to Marston Memorial Historical Center, 770 N High School Rd, Indianapolis, IN 46214 or go online and become a member at <https://give.fmcusa.org/givemarston>.

If you are contributing to the shelving project please mark your gift "library shelves." If you are honoring someone by contributing to an entire shelf or section please include the name in your communication.

Thank you for partnering with us as we prepare for the next 50 years!



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